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A PROCESS FOR IMPROVING  
COUNTY LAND DEVELOPMENT  
AND  
BUILDING PERMIT PROCEDURES

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A REPORT TO THE  
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS  
CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

A PROCESS FOR IMPROVING  
COUNTY LAND DEVELOPMENT  
AND  
BUILDING PERMIT PROCEDURES

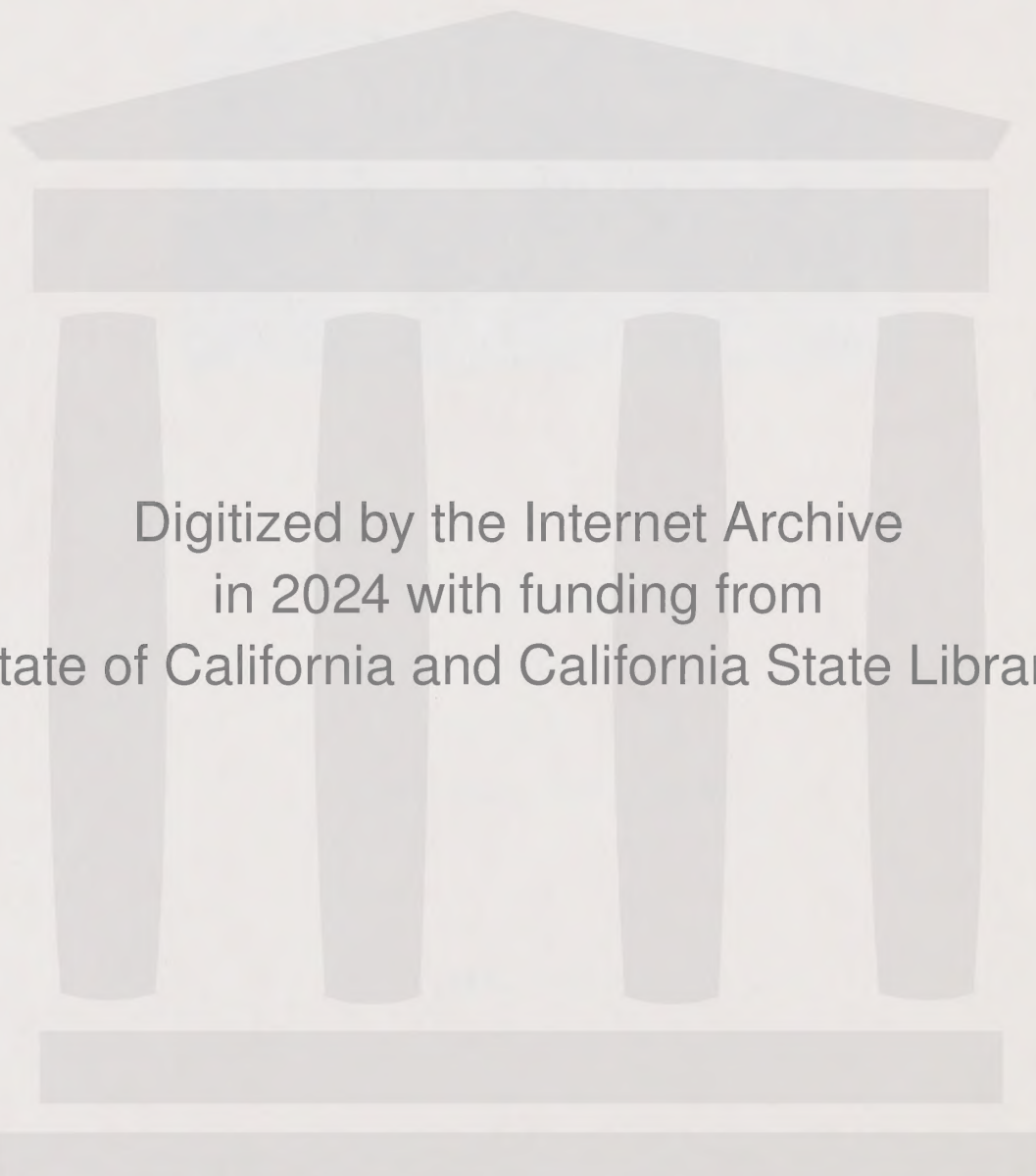
SUBMITTED

BY

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County Administrator

April, 1981



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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report is our response to the Board's request for a review of County processes in the areas of land development and the issuance of building permits. The report results from our management audit teams' review of the County's land development building permit processes, discussion with development interests, inquiry into other agencies' practices, and consultation regarding these findings with the Director of Planning, the Director of Building Inspection, and the Acting Public Works Director. We have also considered the survey conducted by the Coalition of Labor and Business as well as the recommendations of the Governmental Review Committee.

### 1.1 Summary of Recommendations

We are recommending a process for changing the existing County land application and building permit review processes. In this we recognize that reform of land use regulations is a highly visible public process with a large number of interested parties. Any specific recommendation that we make must be fully developed and implemented cooperatively among the people who manage the land use regulation process and those who are governed by it. The formation of successful strategies for the betterment of County land use regulation process must involve the users of the system in a collaborative process with County staff. It is in this regard that these recommendations are but a point of departure and the importance of a process to further develop and implement them is accentuated.



In summary we have concluded that major departmental reorganization change should be withheld. The land application and regulation process can be improved through moderate organizational, policy, and administrative changes within the existing County structure:

- A Central Permit Bureau.
- The establishment of a technically oriented land development process review group to oversee the development and implementation of these recommendations and to monitor the effectiveness of the centralized process.
- The development of an automated land development information system.
- The development of application processing time guidelines.
- The establishment of processes to further Board/staff communication and understanding of policy and its impact.
- The development of Board of Supervisors' guidelines for the review of land development policy and individual proposals.
- The development of written procedures and flow charts which can be followed by all applicants.
- Additional training for personnel in the land development departments in dealing with the public.



Our report does not include a lengthy discussion of the need for changes in the land development review and permitting processes. We believe there is a consensus that our processes can be improved.

### 1.2 Agreement on Need for Change

The recommendations are based on a substantial amount of public and private discussion and/or organized review of the County land use regulation processes including recommendations by individual Supervisors for a community development department, agreement by the County departments that the process can be improved, Citizens' Governmental Review Committee recommendations, and the 1979-80 Grand Jury report. Also, the Coalition of Labor and Business conducted an extensive survey among the development community and has been involved in discussions with County staff.

### 1.3 Description of Report Process

The preparation of this report and its recommendations is based upon a management systems audit of County land development and building permit processes, followed by a detailed discussion of these findings, on an item by item basis, with the affected County departments. Additionally, we have met with a variety of concerned citizens, development interests and associations of professionals in the planning-building field to obtain their input on desirable changes. Also, we have visited other agencies to review their processes to learn from their experiences regarding proposed changes in Contra Costa County.

#### 1.4 Limits on Changing the Land Application and Land Use Regulation Processes

While there can be improvement in the administration of County land regulation programs, all parties should recognize that there are limits to what can be accomplished:

- At some point organizational or administrative changes compromise the interests of a particular group and makes reform a political issue, not an administrative one.
- Land use decisions affect all members of the community and the inherent conflicts provide limits to making the process run smoothly.
- Land use regulation involves many elements not under the control of the Board of Supervisors.
- There is a wide diversity in the sophistication of individuals being regulated by the land development system.
- The development community includes many different needs for information and attention.

Pursuing administrative efficiencies cannot be allowed to compromise the goal of public protection for which these processes were established. Provision of a more efficient process cannot be achieved at the expense of a sound County development policy, fairness and procedural due process.



## 2.0 REPORT OBJECTIVES

In the following sections we will review the recommendations of the Citizens' Governmental Review Committee for a Property Service Department, review other proposals to expedite and improve the process, prepare recommendations to serve as a basis for Board action and public discussion, review the cost-benefit of proposed changes, and recommend a plan for implementing these changes.

### 3.0 REVIEW OF THE CITIZENS' GOVERNMENTAL REVIEW COMMITTEE'S PROPOSAL FOR A PROPERTY SERVICE DEPARTMENT

#### 3.1 Review of Basic Proposal

The Governmental Review Committee's recommendations for a Property Service Department was directed toward two basic objectives. To reduce the Board of Supervisors' span of control they proposed consolidating organizationally what they considered to be compatible functions into a "Property Service Department" with three basic divisions. The first, a "private property" division, the second a "public property" division, and finally a division of technical services. The public property division proposal involves the consolidation of fleet operations, buildings and grounds, transportation, environmental control operations, the County Airport and Animal Control.

They recommended a "private property" division that integrated the land development activities of the Public Works Department, the Building Inspection Department and current Planning Division of the Planning Department. The advanced planning functions of the Planning Department was not included. The Committee visualized the advanced planning function as a component of the County Administrator's Office.

### 3.2 Discussion of the Agency Concept

Contemporary governmental experience with functional consolidation ("agencies") has led to their general discontinuance. This has resulted because there is a hard to define, but non-the-less, critical relationship between the distance from the top manager of an agency and the people providing the actual service. The number of layers of supervision between the top and the bottom in an organization directly relates to its manageability. Large organizations have the problem of being difficult to manage because top executives do not have any direct understanding of working level problems.

The additional management inherent in the proposed Property Service Department (agency) and the additional levels of review are not justified by problems either the County Administrator or the Board of Supervisors are facing overseeing the existing independent departmental structure.



We also believe that the wide range of functions including animal services, planning, building inspection, transportation, flood control, and building maintenance are far too diverse to effectually be combined into one organizational structure. While there is a need for coordination, there is not a substantial duplication of effort in the existing structure. Also, the physical consolidation of these functions will not guarantee an integration of functions.

The existing department heads have statutorily mandated qualifications and powers. It is unlikely that the head of the "Property Services Department" could meet all these requirements. In this case, the decisions of those people in the new department under the new department head may not be legally subject to his or her review.

The proposal to integrate the Animal Services function into a larger agency is a direct contradiction with earlier Board action to separate that function out of one department (Agriculture) to provide for its independent status. The substantial amount of public interest in this function and the resulting need to have management accountable directly to the Board resulted in this change.

### 3.3 Private Property Division Concept

There are policy and administrative advantages to your Board in having functions located in separate departments. There is a check and balance inherent in having planning activities under the Planning Department and supervised, from a policy viewpoint, by the Planning Commission. Public Works activities located separate from the planning function, provides the Board with an independent review of proposals. An independent Building Inspection Department provides a measure of public protection which could be compromised if integrated into a single organizational arrangement.

The discussion that results from the independence of these agencies produces well considered development proposals. Their independence prevents a philosophical viewpoint from gaining preeminence.

### 3.4 Conclusion Regarding GRC Proposals

We concur with the Citizens' Governmental Review Committee that the County's land use regulation system would be improved by better coordination and integrating some functions.

We conclude that most of the objectives of their proposals can be obtained without creating the Property Services Department and its attendant administrative problems and additional costs. We believe that user services can be improved without the huge cost increases of a consolidated agency.



Additionally, there is a potential that the proposed department would be so difficult to manage that our processes could become more cumbersome. It would be prudent to implement either a less dramatic change and then evaluate its benefits on a succession of incremental changes, evaluating the impact of each.

#### 4.0 REVIEW OF OTHER PROPOSALS

##### 4.1 Community Development Department

A number of individuals, including members of the Board, have proposed the direct consolidation of the Public Works, Planning and Building Inspection Departments into a "Community Development Department" in an attempt to further integrate and streamline the land application processes. This concept has been implemented in other jurisdictions. Also, some agencies have subsequently abandoned "community development department" concepts.

In our view, this concept has its principal benefits in jurisdictions with a limited number of staff and volume of work. In an agency the size of Contra Costa County, the problems of compatibility of functions, appointing authority, and management supervision, that were discussed regarding the Governmental Review Committee's proposals, would also be relevant to this discussion.

It is our view that a consolidated community development department would be more difficult to manage by virtue of its size and would possibly erode your Board's control over land development matters by eliminating the check and balance function of independent departments. As with the "Property Services Department" concept, we believe the principal advantages can be realized in other ways.

#### 4.2 A Central Permit Bureau

A number of jurisdictions have attempted to streamline the permitting functions by co-locating staff from the various land use regulatory departments in a central location. This is the concept of a centralized permit bureau. The organizational options range from simply being an information and referral agency to a centralized permit issuing center. This approach has the advantage of offering public convenience without compromising the checks and balances of individual departments, creating additional administrative costs or potentially worsening the current system.

### 5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is possible to improve the application and permit process for the user in ways that are consistent with the primary criterion of protecting the public. Actions to improve the land regulation processes will involve a combination of organizational, administrative, and policy changes. In this chapter of our report we



will outline in some detail our recommendations in these three main areas.

## 5.1 Organization Changes on Changes

### 5.1.1 No Consolidation of Departments

As is evident from our discussions of the proposals made by the Governmental Review Committee and for a community development department, we do not believe that it is appropriate to recommend a consolidation of Public Works, Building Inspection and Planning Departments at this time. We have not completely eliminated this option, but are proposing a more incremental organization change, which properly implemented and managed, can produce the desired improvement in user benefit.

### 5.1.2 A Concept of a Single System

We believe that organizational change and its implementation should be structured on the assumption that the land regulation and permitting process is one overall system rather than three. The activities of the three independent departments are sub-systems. Our conclusion is that there is a very strong systemic relationship between the three land regulation permitting departments that needs to be better managed and coordinated. This can best be done if the Board, the departments and the public conceptualize these functions as one system rather than three.

### 5.1.3 Formation of a Central Permit Bureau

We are recommending the implementation of a Central Permit Bureau where representatives of the Planning, Public Works, Building Inspection, and Health Departments would co-locate to provide information and issue permits on a more expeditious basis.

The Central Permit Bureau would have delegated authority from the individual departments to grant certain approvals and issue certain permits. Its goal will be to assist individuals through the total process on a more expeditious basis. It is not to be a further control process. This latter point needs emphasis.

Some agencies have found permit bureaus to be dysfunctional because they turned out to be "one more step" and thus complicated rather than streamlined the process. We believe a properly structured and managed permit bureau can avoid this pitfall if recognized in advance.

We further recommend that the permit bureau be a mandatory process for individuals seeking approval of certain, carefully determined, land applications and permits. We recognize that the permit bureau concept has little utility for large scale developments which

would be subject to extensive technical and staff review. We have not determined the "threshold" development that would be exempted from the permit bureau process.

Nonetheless, we believe that for the process to be cost effective, individual applicants should not have the discretion to choose to work independently with the departments. Such a choice should be left to the County.

The permit bureau needs to be staffed with professional, career oriented employees. The use of paraprofessional or clerical positions, while offering some salary savings, will not produce the benefit to justify the cost of the bureau. In this regard the concept of the Governmental Review Committee for an integrated staff is being recommended.

Specifically the permit bureau would include the permitting operations of the Public Works, Planning, Building Inspection, and Health Departments physically co-located in the Martinez Civic Center. For example, we could utilize the first floor of the North Wing of the Administration Building as the permit bureau, allowing the design of an integrated counter and staff support operation.



The Martinez location is suggested, given the already available office spaces of the three departments in the Civic Center. While there may be some advantages, from a public access viewpoint to locate the permit bureau elsewhere, the need for it to be close to support staff would mean also locating out of the Civic Center the other backup departments. We did not believe the capital cost of such a move is justified.

Finally, the permit bureau should encourage representatives of independent sanitary, water, fire and utility districts, which also issue land development permits, to be at the permit bureau. At the least, we should try to install direct phone lines to these agencies.

#### 5.1.4 Organization of the Central Permit Bureau

The details regarding the organization of the bureau have not been fully finalized in discussions between the affected departments. The administration of the bureau involve the question of establishing a "land application coordinator" position to run the bureau. The relationship of that position to the Planning Director, the Public Works Director, the Director of Building Inspection, and the Health Services Director also needs to be developed. The

supervision of one position by four department heads will involve some additional study.

The option of the bureau not having a central administrator but being operated by a coordination council of the individual departments should also be explored. The problems of accountability, responsibility, responsiveness, and management control are trade-offs in this type of an arrangement.

#### 5.1.5 Broadening Inspector Duties

Another organization change independent of the permit bureau proposal has been an often discussed proposal to consolidate the inspector functions of Building Inspection, Planning and Public Works Departments. There appear to be benefits in terms of cost effectiveness and in expediting approvals by consolidating certain inspection functions. We are recommending the establishment of a inter-departmental task force to review this in greater detail and subsequently make specific recommendations to our office and the Board.

#### 5.2 Policy Changes

We believe a number of changes in the way that the County Board of Supervisors develops and administers land regulation policies are needed.

### 5.2.1 Establish a Land Application Process Review Group

We are recommending the establishment of a technically oriented advisory body to the Board of Supervisors on the land application process as was supported by the survey conducted by the Coalition of Labor and Business. This advisory group would be charged to assist in the implementation of these recommendations and monitor their effectiveness.

This recommendation recognizes that the implementation of changes in land regulation processes are incremental and involve public and private interests. Additionally, such a group would have the advantage of providing a collaborative, detailed, and thorough review of proposed changes to be sure that these proposals achieve their intended purpose.

The land application process review group would not be an appeals body on Board or department development policies or the ordinance interpretation of department staff. The group would have a sunset clause providing for a two-year authorization so that the Board could evaluate its effectiveness.



5.2.2 Encourage a Clear Understanding Between Board  
and Departmental Staff of the County's Land  
Development Policy

The County General Plan is the basic County land development policy. There should be regularly scheduled Board workshops on the specific aspects of the General Plan to further the understanding between the Board and staff of its contents and its implications for development.

The successful administration of a land regulation program is based on a continuing dialogue between the Board and the staff. Mechanisms to accentuate this communication between Board/staff understanding are important to a reform of our processes.

5.2.3 Develop Board and Staff Agreements Regarding  
the Impact of County Land Development Policy

The impact of specific development policies should be fully understood by both the Board and staff and include an explicit commitment by the Board to follow these policies. The ability to expedite the process can be enhanced when decisions can be made by County staff based on their understanding of the Board's policy objectives.

#### 5.2.4 Develop Guidelines for the Board of Supervisors' Review of Appeals on Specific Proposals

Our objective is that these changes should make appeals to your Board on specific projects generally unnecessary because of improved land application processes and Board/staff communication. To the extent we can reduce appeals because development interests have a strong working relationship with the departments, we will expedite the review process.

The public needs to recognize the Board members' quasi-judicial duties regarding the land development process. Members are limited in their legal ability to receive information on a project appeals outside of public Board meetings.

While we recognize every citizen's right to appeal an administrative action by a County department, they should generally be on broad policy issues such as General Plan amendments.

### 5.3 Administrative Changes

#### 5.3.1 Adopt Processing Time Schedules

We believe that it is desirable to develop reasonable processing time schedules for measuring and monitoring workload and departmental efficiency. Additionally, development interests need to have a

reasonable estimate of the amount of time necessary to obtain approval or denial of their application. These would be systemwide time goals that are in addition to existing departmental guidelines.

In the view of the departments these standards need to be tied to agreed upon and realistic staffing standards. Certain deadlines cannot be obtained without the necessary staff.

#### 5.3.2 Document the Whole Application and Permitting Process

The procedures of the departments need to be documented in a form which can be easily followed by applicants. These procedures would include forms, instructions, fee schedules, and processing schedules.

The departments should also develop an integrated land application processing flow diagram that could be located in a prominent position in the existing departments (and eventually in the Central Permit Bureau) whereby individuals can see the process in a graphic form. These documents must be kept current.



### 5.3.3 Implement an Automated Land Development Information System

In the 1980-1981 budget the Board authorized funding to begin in the design of an integrated land development information system. Such a system would be based on Assessor's parcel numbers and would allow for the more expeditious processing of land applications by providing needed information on an on-line basis. It would also involve an application and permit tracking capability so that the status of individual projects can be monitored. Terminals could be located at locations other than County offices so that individuals could determine the status of projects without calling the County and obtain needed development information.

We believe that there is a substantial processing benefit to such a system. There are potentially some operational savings in addition.

While we endorse the automated land development system, it can be implemented separate from the other recommendations of this report.

Subsequent to this report to your Board, more detail on the proposed Land Development Information System will be prepared. The matter is on referral to the Finance Committee but needs to be also considered by the Internal Operations Committee in their review of this report.

#### 5.3.4 Provide Staff with Public Relations Training

Our review indicated that it is desirable to develop an interdepartmental training program for staff who are involved in public contact. A substantial benefit could be realized from a training program that would provide employees with skills that encouraged positive contacts with their clients. It appears that a substantial element in our efforts to improve land application processes would be the development of "can-do" and non-adversary attitude between employees and applicants. Each of the departments should designate an employee to coordinate this activity.

#### 5.3.5 Define Authority Relationships

There is a problem that needs to be rectified regarding the authority of counter personnel to advise applicants on specific aspects of land development applications. We have a difficulty in our process whereby counter personnel occasionally advise applicants incorrectly thus creating a problem for applicants when they file their applications. A more concentrated effort to define the rules and responsibilities of counter personnel and their ability to make decisions would help improve the process.

As a part of this effort, the development of ways to identify counter staff would assist the department's clients to know the position of the individuals with whom they are conferring.

#### 5.3.6 Develop an Interdepartmental Complaint Form

The development of a uniform interdepartmental complaint form and the related processing procedures would enable departmental management to better manage public relations problems.

#### 5.3.7 Establish a Multi-year Interdepartmental Budget and Revenue System

We are recommending the establishment of an interdepartmental task force to develop a multi-year and interdepartmental budget and revenue system for the land development process. The task force would identify the public benefit aspects of our land application process and those which are a principal benefit to the users of the service. Such information would help determine what percentage of cost should be covered through fees.

Additionally, such a process would recognize the cyclical and multi-year nature of the land development business. This would enable the departments to plan for their staffing and operational matters in a manner consistent with the industry they are regulating.



### 5.3.8 Monitoring and Evaluation Process and Procedures

It is desirable to develop a comprehensive system to tie budgets, work programs, goals and objectives, and accomplishment into a single management information process for review by the County Administrator and the Board of Supervisors. The use of an interdepartmental task force in cooperation with the aforementioned advisory group would enable the Board of Supervisors to monitor the successful implementation of these recommendations and their cost-benefit.

## 6.0 COST REVIEW

The implementation of the above recommendations involves additional one-time and on-going costs. Most of these costs are for the automated land application data processing system which can be considered separately by the Board of Supervisors.

### 6.1 Organizational Changes

#### 6.1.1 Staffing the Permit Bureau

The creation of the Central Permit Bureau will essentially involve the use of existing positions. We would expect the establishment of a management coordinator position to run the bureau which would be a net additional salary and benefits cost of approximately \$40,000 a year. Additionally, the establishment

of professional counter positions may involve some classification changes resulting in higher salaries. This may be offset by the need for fewer such counter positions.

#### 6.1.2 Capital Cost for the Permit Bureau

The creation of a Central Permit Bureau involves remodeling County space to house such an operation. If the County were to remodel the first floor of the North Wing of the County Administration Building the one-time cost would be approximately \$250,000. In addition, there would be the cost to relocate the Sheriff's Office into other space. This has not been included as a cost of this proposal.

### 6.2 Policy Change Costs

#### 6.2.1 Advisory Group Costs

The establishment of the advisory group would possibly involve some minimal additional cost to the County for staffing and supplies. We have not attempted to identify these inasmuch as we do not believe the cost for the group is substantial.

### 6.3 Administrative Changes

#### 6.3.1 The Automated System Costs

Using some funding made available by the departments, an outside consultant analyzed the feasibility of the automated land information system. This report divided the system into several phases stretching over five years. The total development and conversion cost is estimated at \$1.1 million. These costs can be budgeted at about \$223,000 for each of the five years.

The feasibility study indicates that the system will provide benefits to the user departments (Assessor, Public Works, Planning, Building Inspection, and Data Processing) to offset the additional operating costs (\$370,000 in the first year--up to \$450,000 in the fifth year).

This estimate is preliminary. The review of this proposal is continuing and will be very thorough before a final proposal is presented to your Board.

#### 6.3.2 Training Costs

The development of an integrated training program would depend on the format utilized. The cost of this type of training would be approximately \$5,000. The development of an in-house and on-going training program for new employees should make this a one-time cost.



### 6.3.3 Written Procedures and Brochures Costs

Depending to the extent the County intends to go into the development of detailed design guidelines and brochures, there could be a significant cost. It was not within the scope of this report to determine the scope of this effort. Once the advisory group and the staff of the departments have discussed this matter and developed a work program we will provide a subsequent report to the Board.

## 7.0 COST VERSUS BENEFITS OF THESE PROPOSALS

The decisions facing your Board regarding these recommendations are more public policy than economic. We will summarize some of these considerations.

### 7.1 Costs

The costs of these proposals are discussed in the preceding chapter of this report (6.0 COST REVIEW--pages 23-26). We believe that it would be possible to offset some of these costs with higher fees and/or user charges (mainly for the automated system). The land development industry can be expected to support higher fees if the process is expedited.

## 7.2 Benefits

The benefits from a more expeditious land use permitting process included the following:

- Contra Costa County becomes an even more desirable place to invest, thus allowing us to attract the most desirable developments.
- The County meets its obligations to help make housing more affordable.
- The increased tax revenues from new development are enhanced and realized earlier.
- Increased administrative processing of land use applications makes more time available to the Planning Commission and the Board to consider the broader and long-range land use issues.
- A more favorable public image is achieved.

## 8.0 IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

We recommend the following to implement this report.

### 8.1 Concept

As we stated earlier the implementation plan and these recommendations should be approached conceptually as recommendations to improve one land application processing system.

## 8.2 Procedures

In approach, departments should be directed to implement these recommendations in ways that do not add steps to routine permit approvals. There are a number of very routine approvals granted by the departments that may not necessarily need to go through the Central Permit Bureau.

## 8.3 Project Director

For reasons of administrative effectiveness and accountability to this office and the Board of Supervisors, we would recommend that one person be appointed as the Project Director who would be responsible for implementing all these recommendations in cooperation with the County Administrator, the departments and the advisory group. We should consider a temporary position reporting directly to the Office of the County Administrator. Additionally, this position would staff the advisory group.

## 8.4 Advisory Group

The Board should move ahead to establish an advisory group which would serve as a review body for implementation of these recommendations. This group, working with staff and the Project Director, would develop specific implementation plans and recommendations conceptually outlined in this report.



### 8.5 Schedule

While there are organizational and administrative changes that can be implemented early, the Board should agree to a phased schedule, covering five years, to completely implement all the recommendations of this report. Obviously the development of the Automated Information System is the most time consuming and would take the most amount of time. But additionally, the development of a capital program, the training of staff, and some period of time for a collaborative review of these recommendations by an advisory group is necessary for their successful implementation.

### 8.6 Physical Location and Design of the Central Permit Bureau

The Board should approve funding for the County Administrator to work with the Public Works Department's Architectural Division in reviewing the physical layout of other Central Permit Bureaus and developing an architectural program that can be reviewed with the departments and the advisory group.

## 9.0 CONCLUSION

Our efforts to review the land application and regulation policies of the County lead us to conclude that it is a highly complex and dynamic system. Our challenge was to make recommendations that improved the accountability, communications, and coordination of our system for those functions that naturally overlap. We are proposing a process to achieve these objectives.

It is important that we understand the limits of our ability to change the system to the benefit of the entire community.

Based on the work done by the Governmental Review Committee and "COLAB", this report lays the foundation for substantial improvement. It is not an end in itself. Additional work and cooperation by private and public interests in the land development business must be successfully structured into a collaborative process to implement these recommendations and, once implemented, to monitor their effectiveness. We need to recognize the on-going nature of change in this system. Only through such a recognition and a continuing process can we successfully reform our processes and maintain them in the most effective and efficient manner.



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